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the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

# WHAT'S IN A NAME?

## AIDS, VERNACULAR RISK PERCEPTION, AND THE CULTURE OF OWNERSHIP



A LECTURE PRESENTED BY  
**DIANE GOLDSTEIN**  
PROFESSOR OF FOLKLORE AT MEMORIAL  
UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND  
ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA

I WILL DISCUSS THE IMPORTANCE  
LEGENDS ABOUT THE AIDS VIRUS,  
OF THE WORK OF THE NAMES  
AND ITS AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT.

Wednesday  
October 4, 2006  
6:30 PM - 7:30 PM  
Montpelier Room, LM 619  
6th Floor of the Madison Building  
Library of Congress  
101 Independence Ave., SE  
Washington, DC

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# WHAT'S IN A NAME?

## AIDS, VERNACULAR RISK PERCEPTION, AND THE CULTURE OF OWNERSHIP

"My friend Marcia told me this story. She said her friend thinks she even knows who did it. Anyway, this guy finds out he's got AIDS and he's mad and he wants to get back at the whole world, so he goes into a drug store. And he borrowed his grandmother's hat pin. So, when nobody is looking he takes the pin and he pokes it all the way through a condom box on the shelf. He does that four or five times. Then he puts the box back and he leaves. The next night he does the same thing with a different box. Anyway, he kept it up - night after night, box after box, until, you know, he got them all. All the condoms in the whole city and not one fit to be used. So now, people are getting pregnant, getting AIDS, getting VD. They think they're protected and they're not".

Since reports of the first cases of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s, contemporary, or "urban," legends about origins of the virus, modes of transmission, deliberate infection, withheld treatment, and minority genocide have proliferated. Told cross-culturally, AIDS legends recount HIV-filled needles in movie theatre seats, pinpricks in drugstore shelf condoms, semen in fast food, and HIV-positive sexual predators. Though fascinating, intriguing, and often frightening, these narratives do more than merely entertain. They warn and inform, articulate notions of risk, provide political commentary on public health actions, and offer insight into the relationship between cultural and health truths. As part of community discourse about the nature of disease, legends provide powerful information about cultural understandings of the virus.

Diane Goldstein explores the story-making activities that have surrounded the AIDS epidemic, focusing on the potential implications of legend discourse for public health. When taken seriously, with respect for both the narratives and their tellers, AIDS legends enable understandings of perceptions of risk, reveal local views of public health efforts, and highlight areas of health care and education that need to be improved. AIDS narratives, however, do not simply articulate perceptions of disease realities; they also create those realities. Told within scientific and official sectors as well as lay communities, legends play a significant role in medical, legal, and educational responses to the disease and its management. Here and in her book, *Once Upon A Virus*, Goldstein explores how narrative constructs the way we interact with disease, creating cultural scripts for both personal and scientific decision-making.

To mark the recent designation of the AIDS Memorial Quilt as an American Treasure, and in honor of the work of the Names Project, this talk will focus specifically on the

powerful relationship between names and AIDS in vernacular understandings of risk. AIDS legends focus heavily on names: names to scapegoat, names at risk, names hidden, and names flaunted. Deeply tied to issues of risk recognition and ownership, the association of numbers with names transforms our response to AIDS, forcing us to recognize the connection between the epidemic and ourselves. In this lecture, Goldstein explores one community's legendary association of AIDS with a single name, tracing vernacular notions of risk in the absence of pluralistic models of vulnerability. Moving out from that case study, Goldstein will explore the relationship between names and ownership, demonstrating the crucial role of vernacular artistry in AIDS interventions.

Diane Goldstein

St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada

Diane Goldstein is Professor of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland and is cross-appointed to Memorial University's School of Medicine. She is author of *Once Upon A Virus: AIDS Legends and Vernacular Risk Perception* (Utah State University Press 2004), co-editor (with Cindy Patton and Heather Worth) of a special issue of *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* entitled "Reckless Vectors: The Infecting Other in HIV/AIDS Law" (2005) and editor of one of the earliest interdisciplinary anthologies on AIDS, entitled *Talking AIDS: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* (ISER Books 1991). Diane has been extensively involved in AIDS priority-setting and policy-making initiatives over the last twenty years, including a three year appointment to the Canadian National Planning and Priorities Forum for HIV/AIDS. Diane is currently President of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, member of the executive board of the American Folklore Society, and serves or has served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of American Folklore*, *Folklore*, *Ethnologies*, *Contemporary Legend*, and the *Journal of Applied Folklore*.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site at <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

